

Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge and South San Diego Bay Unit of the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge

July 2003 - Planning Update 4



GREETINGS!

This is the fourth in a series of planning updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) designed to inform and involve you in the process of developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and the South San Diego Bay Unit of the San Diego NWR. These planning updates are provided periodically as we work to develop the CCP and prepare the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The CCP is intended to provide a blueprint for how these Refuges will be managed over the next 15 years. Management activities will focus on the conservation of Refuge resources, particularly Federally endangered and threatened species and their habitats, and providing opportunities for compatible public use.

DRAFT CCP/EIS NEARS COMPLETION

The draft CCP/EIS for the Sweetwater Marsh NWR/South San Diego Bay Unit is expected to be completed this fall. The availability of the draft will be announced in the Federal Register and in a postcard to be sent to everyone who is included on our mailing list. You will be provided with 60 days to review the document and submit your comments. Specific details will be presented in the Federal Register and provided on our CCP web page (see back page for our Internet address).

Since our last Planning Update, we have been refining restoration options, developing management alternatives, evaluating potential impacts, and preparing the draft CCP/EIS. A list of past and future milestones is provided below.

CCP MILESTONES

- ✓ CCP Initiated (June 2000)
- ✓ Public Scoping Meetings (July 2000)
- ✓ Issues Identified (August 2000)
- ✓ Public Workshops (Sept. 2000 - June 2001)
- ✓ Goals & Objectives Prepared (Oct. - Dec. 2001)
- ✓ Management Alternatives Developed (April - December 2002)
- Refine Alternatives/Evaluate Impacts (December 2002 to present)
- Prepare Draft CCP/EIS (April 2002 to present)
- Begin Public Review of Draft CCP/EIS (Fall 2003)
- Distribute Final EIS (Winter 2003/2004)
- Record of Decision (Spring 2004)

Management Alternatives Proposed for Evaluation in the Draft CCP/EIS

As part of the CCP process, a range of management alternatives are developed, with each alternative incorporating a different set of objectives and strategies for achieving the Refuge purposes, vision, and goals. The management alternatives under development for both the Sweetwater Marsh NWR and the South San Diego Bay Unit are briefly summarized below. For a more detailed explanation, as well as for graphic depictions of the various restoration proposals, please visit our CCP web page (see back page for Internet address). The various alternatives differ in the level of wildlife and habitat management to be implemented, as well as in the extent of public use opportunities to be provided. Each of the management alternatives will be described in detail in the draft CCP/EIS, as will the anticipated environmental consequences of implementing the various actions described in the alternatives.

Preliminary Management Alternatives for the Sweetwater Marsh NWR

Alternative A - No Action. Alternative A assumes no change to past and present management activities on the Refuge, resulting in no new wildlife and habitat management programs, no restoration or enhancement proposals, and no changes to the current public use program. This alternative represents the baseline from which other “action” alternatives will be evaluated.

Alternative B - Implement Habitat Enhancement. Alternative B places greater emphasis on marsh management and includes several enhancement projects intended to improve tidal circulation within the marsh. This alternative also proposes the development and implementation of a cultural resource management program. The Refuge's current public use program, which provides opportunities for environmental education and interpretation and wildlife observation and photography, would remain unchanged.

Alternative C - Implement Habitat Enhancement and Restoration and Increase Public Uses. Under this alternative, the management activities described in Alternative B would be expanded to include the restoration of intertidal and upland habitat. In addition, the existing trail system and associated interpretive elements would be redesigned to complement an expanded environmental education and interpretation program.



Preliminary Management Alternatives for the South San Diego Bay Unit

Alternative A - No Action. Alternative A assumes no change to current management activities. Habitat enhancement would be limited to those actions required in a Cooperative Agreement between the Service and the Unified Port of San Diego (Port). The Refuge's current public use program would not change and the salt works would continue to operate under a Special Use Permit. Alternative A represents the baseline from which other action alternatives will be evaluated.

Alternative B - Expand Habitat Management and Enhance Nesting Opportunities. This alternative proposes to expand the habitat management activities currently being implemented on the Refuge to include activities necessary to enhance nesting opportunities within the salt works and actions aimed at increasing public awareness of the importance of protecting refuge resources. Specific actions include capping the levee surfaces with appropriate nesting substrate (light sand and shell fragments), providing better access for shorebirds and seabirds to the edges of the ponds by recontouring the levee side slopes, expanding the total surface area within the salt works available for nesting by approximately 18 acres, increasing awareness of the 5-mile per hour speed limit within the open bay portions of the Refuge, and developing a program to reduce the accumulation of fishing line and other debris within the bay environment. The Refuge's current public use program, which provides opportunities for fishing, wildlife observation, and recreational boating, would remain unchanged. In addition, solar salt production would continue within its current configuration.

Alternative C - Expand Habitat Management, Enhance Nesting Opportunities, Implement Habitat Restoration, and Increase Public Use Opportunities. Under this alternative, portions of the salt ponds and the Refuge's 90 acres of Otay River floodplain would be restored to coastal salt marsh and native upland habitat. Up to 410 acres of intertidal habitat would be restored within the 1,070-acre salt works and approximately 140 acres of restored intertidal salt marsh, freshwater wetlands, and upland habitat would be created within the Otay River floodplain. A range of restoration options will be evaluated under this alternative for both the salt works and the Otay River floodplain. This alternative also includes the habitat management activities proposed in Alternative B.

Under this alternative, the Refuge's public use program would provide increased opportunities for fishing and wildlife observation and photography by opening the northern levee of Pond 11 to public access. The number of guided nature tours currently conducted within the salt works would also be increased. Also under this alternative, the public use program would be expanded to include opportunities for environmental education and following the completion of a detailed hunting plan, the Refuge would be opened for waterfowl hunting. The existing solar salt operation would continue, but within a reduced footprint.



Bird Activity on a Levee in the South San Diego Bay Unit

Photo by John Konecny, USFWS

(continued on page 4)

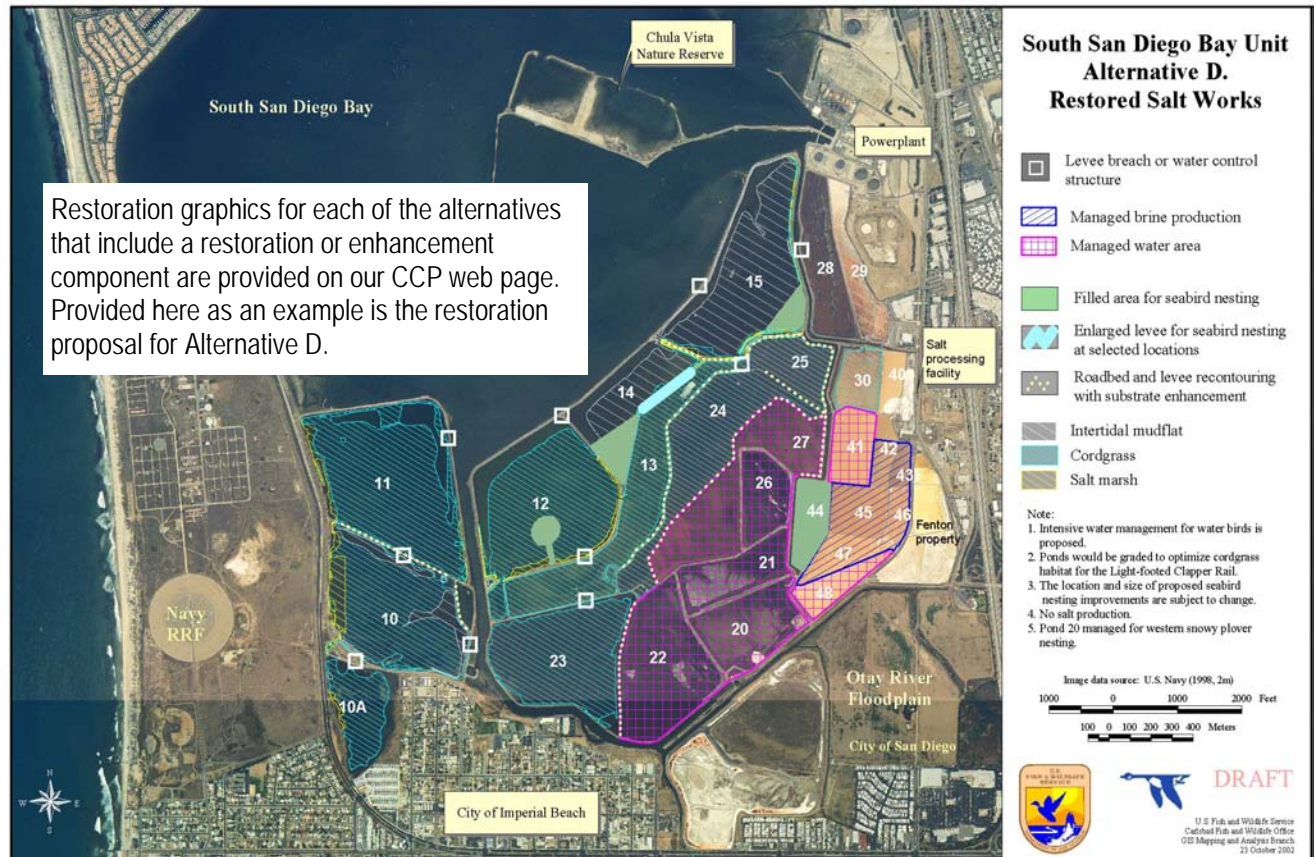


Male Western Snowy Plover
Photo by Peter Knapp

Alternative D - Expand Habitat Management, Enhance Nesting Opportunities, Maximize Habitat Restoration, and Moderately Increase Public Use Opportunities. Under this alternative, the habitat potential within the salt works would be maximized. Approximately 600 acres of existing salt ponds would be restored to tidal influence by breaching the pond levees. Modifications (cutting and filling) to some ponds are proposed to achieve elevations appropriate for supporting cordgrass-dominated coastal salt marsh habitat. About 33 acres of new nesting habitat would be created within the salt works and 275 acres of managed water area would be provided, of which about 45 acres would be managed to support the production of brine invertebrates, such as brine shrimp and brine flies. Bay water would be circulated through the managed water area to provide foraging and resting areas for various species of migratory

birds. Water levels would be regulated seasonally and at least one pond could be emptied in the summer to provide additional nesting opportunities for the Federally threatened western snowy plover. Nesting enhancements, as described in Alternative B, and the restoration proposals for the Otay River floodplain, as described in Alternative C, would also be included as a part of this alternative.

Moderate expansion of the current public use program is proposed including developing an environmental education program, providing additional guided nature tours of the salt works, and providing opportunities for environmental interpretation and wildlife observation and photography around the perimeter of the Refuge. Solar salt production would be eliminated under this alternative.



Initial Substrate Enhancement Completed for Selected Levees within the Salt Works

This past winter, three levees within the salt works were capped with six to eight inches of clean sand in an effort to improve nesting success for several species of seabirds, including the Federally endangered California least tern. We hope to cap additional levees later this fall following the end of nesting season. Two of the levees that were capped provided nesting habitat for Caspian terns, California least terns, black skimmers, and the Federally threatened western snowy plover over the past few breeding seasons. The third levee was selected because it has not recently been an active nesting area.

Monitoring during this year's nesting season will allow us to observe how the various nesting seabirds use these enhanced areas. Initial observations are yielding positive results. Already this season, we have observed one least

tern nest on the third levee and extensive use of one of the other capped levees by Caspian terns.

Substrate enhancement of the levees was made possible through funding provided by the Port per a Cooperative Agreement between with the Service and the Port, and by Service management funds, which were matched by the staff at the South Bay Salt Works, who generously donated the equipment and labor required to place the sand on the levees.



California Least Tern

WE INVITE YOUR COMMENTS

A goal of the CCP process is to ensure public involvement in refuge management decisions. Over the past three years, you have been active participants in this process and we encourage your continued involvement. Any comments you might have regarding the information provided in this update or any issues relevant to the San Diego Bay Refuges should be sent to the CCP Planner (see back page for contact information).

One of the next steps in the CCP process will be the review of the draft CCP/EIS. This fall, you will receive a notice announcing the availability of this document. We encourage your comments. If you are not on our mailing list and would like to be notified when the draft is available, please contact the CCP planner. Your continued interest in our National Wildlife Refuges is appreciated.

MISSION OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

"To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR
FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE
San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex
6010 Hidden Valley Road
Carlsbad, CA 92009

First Class Mail
Postage and Fees
PAID
US Department
of the Interior
Permit G-77



We have moved!
The San Diego National Wildlife Refuge
Complex office is now located at
6010 Hidden Valley Road
Carlsbad, CA 92009

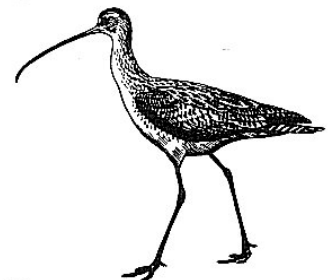
Our Phone and Fax numbers remain the same:
Phone: (760) 930-0168 Fax: (760) 930-0256

Our CCP Planner, Victoria Touchstone, has also moved
to our new office. Her new phone number is:
(760) 431-9440 ex. 349.

If you would like to review past
Planning Updates or obtain more
information about proposed
alternatives, visit our CCP
Webpage.

Go to:
<http://sandiegorefuges.fws.gov>.

Once at the website, click on
"What's New" and then click on
"Read the
Comprehensive
Conservation
Plan."



If you would like your name removed from or added
to our mailing list, contact our CCP Planner by phone,
mail, or email (Victoria_Touchstone@r1.fws.gov).